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ABSTRACT

To whet the curiosity and interest of teachers who may be frustrated with the reading vocabulary achievement of pupils, an informal study compared Piaget's cognitive development theory, recent brain research, and the reading process, and examined how the theory and research apply to reading instruction. The Gestalt Process Approach to teaching reading encourages the active involvement of the learner, including whole word recognition, word boundary, multi-language activities, instant sight word development and sentence building. Based on this process, two first grade teachers daily used word card study for each child in their classes, regardless of level. Instruction followed a pattern of presentation which included concrete (naming objects), semi-concrete (matching objects to words), semi-abstract (matching words to pictures), and abstract (word cards held up when called). Then, when handed a reader, students could read it. Two other classes followed the basal linear curriculum. Findings indicated support for the Gestalt Process Approach. (Six tables of data are included.) (NH)

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THE GESTALT PROCESS APPROACH AND WORD ACQUISITION

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The Gestalt Process Approach and Word Acquisition

One primary concern of educators is the puzzle of determining how children learn to read and learn to learn. Classroom teachers, in general, fall into the lockstep attempt of teaching children through materials, rather than through cognitive developmental processing. Actually, many teachers teach the way they were taught. During preservice training they may survey theories of learning rather than study in depth these theories and their application into practice. Also, Piagetian theory may have been studied during preservice training without being related to reading theory. Thus, cognitive development theory is rarely applied to reading instruction.

The purpose of this article is to whet the curiosity and interest of teachers who may be frustrated with the reading vocabulary achievement of pupils. To accomplish this, Piaget's cognitive developmental theory, recent brain-research, and the reading process will be compared and applied to reading instruction. It is necessary to present the characteristics of neurological function and cognitive development as they relate to learning to read so that suggestions can effectively be applied. This information is condensed and tabled.

Piaget (1952) links language and thought to all functional reasoning. He has dichotomized cognitive development into four stages. These stages are sensorimotor, pre-operational, concrete operational, and formal operational. For the purpose of relating this discussion to beginning reading instruction, only the pre-operational (4-7 years) and the concrete operational (7-11 years) stages will be included. The characteristics of development in language and thinking/reasoning which relate to reading are given in Tables 1 and 2.

TABLE I
LANGUAGE CHARACTERISTICS

<u>Pre-Operational (4-7)</u>	<u>Concrete Operational (7-11)</u>
Egocentric speech.	Thinks with words rather than images.
Difficulty understanding other's views or remembering more than one step instruction.	Must relate words back to concrete objects or experiences.
Beginning to verbalize images.	Cannot deal with abstract thought.
Uses sophisticated words without understanding them.	Tries sophisticated words with only vague awareness of meaning.

TABLE 2
THINKING-REASONING CHARACTERISTICS

<u>Pre-Operational (4-7)</u>	<u>Concrete Operational (7-11)</u>
Mental symbols stand for real objects.	Performs mental operations using imagery of real objects.
Cannot sequence nor conserve or reverse thought.	Can conserve quantity and reverse operations.
Can think of the whole but not the parts at the same time.	Able to use abstract words to stand for objects.
	Can think of the parts while retaining their relationship to the whole.

To compare and combine Piaget's developmental theory with brain studies, notice the characteristics of hemispheric specificity that relate to reading development in Table 3. Both hemispheres are working together simultaneously, each offering a preference of perceptual function (Springer, 1981).

TABLE 3
BRAIN HEMISPHERE CHARACTERISTICS
THAT RELATE TO READING

Right Hemisphere	Left Hemisphere
Awareness of things.	Places awareness into words.
Perceives wholes.	Figures out things step-by-step.
Relates to objects.	Can use parts of information to represent a whole idea.
Sees likenesses and understands relationships.	Keeps track of time and sequence.
Sees things in relation to other things (spatial).	Draws conclusions based on reason.
Uses hunches or visual imagery.	Uses logic in decision making.

The ages given by Piaget for each stage are not all inclusive. Some children may slip into the concrete stage before age seven or back into the pre-operational stage under stress (Charles, 1974). There are some elements of processing stimuli that can interfere with reading progress. They are the elements of centration, class inclusion, conservation of length, and states of transformation (Waller, 1977).

If a child is still centering, or focusing on parts of words, this will interfere with the Gestalt of word form, thus hindering word memory. Class inclusion is the ability to see word affixes that change meaning. Lack of this ability interferes with comprehension. Conservation of length is needed to sequence, differentiate relevant and irrelevant information, differentiate letter form, or retain rules to apply to decoding. States of transformation affect left-to-right transformation for letter formation, word attack, omission of reversals in reading, and memory for visual stimuli. Each of these elements are right-brain characteristics as shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4
ELEMENTS THAT INTERFERE WITH READING

<u>CENTRATION</u> (2-7) Interferes with GESTALT of word form. Causes focus on parts. Difficulty holding word boundary. RIGHT-BRAIN Spatial Closure	<u>CLASS INCLUSION</u> (7-11) Ability to see small groups of letters added to words to change meaning. Lack of this interferes with comprehension. RIGHT-BRAIN Imagery
<u>LENGTH CONSERVATION</u> (7-11) Needed to: ...integrate events. ...differentiate relevant vs irrelevant stimuli ...differentiate letter features ...retain rules to apply to word/sound decoding. RIGHT-BRAIN Visuo-Spatial	<u>STATES OF TRANSFORMATION</u> (7-11) Needed for: ...left-to-right transformation of letter formation. ...left-to-right word attack to omit reversal reading. ...memory of form Gestalt b-d q-g-p n-u m-w RIGHT-BRAIN Spatial Relationships

WHAT THIS MEANS TO THE READING TEACHER

Piaget (Philips, 1969) states that the six year old perceives holistically and more easily grasps a whole concept or word (right hemisphere) rather than singly relates the parts (left hemisphere). The process of dealing with parts requires abstract thinking which includes using small bits of information and sequencing (left hemisphere). This ability usually develops during the concrete operational stage (7-11).

Most reading instruction utilizes the abstract verbal abilities unique to the left hemisphere function before the child is neurologically capable of such function with ease (Hart, 1983). Instruction needs to include right hemispheric training which will use most six-year-olds' strength of Gestalt processing of word form. This would mean that beginning reading instruction should lean toward concrete manipulation and active involvement of the learner to include whole word recognition, word boundary, multi-language activities, instant sight word development through a modified VAKT method, and sentence building. The VAKT method ties together the visual and auditory input with movement and touch. Sentence building ties together semantics and syntax which transfers the concrete (right brain, holistic) to the abstract print (left brain, linguistic). All of this involvement which includes language, visual, auditory, touch, movement, syntax, and semantics in reading instruction is the Gestalt Process Approach.

According to Waller (1977), three stages of learning to read require specific competencies of characteristics in Piagetian cognitive developmental stages. The author has added the hemispheric function to each of these characteristics as shown in Table 5.

TABLE 5
STAGES OF LEARNING TO READ
RELATED TO PIAGETIAN COMPETENCY

STAGES	PIAGETIAN COMPETENCY
<u>STAGE 1</u>	
Discrimination.	Perceptual and cognitive decentration to extract relevant and discriminating features (right brain).
Differentiate graphic symbols.	Classification skills (right brain). Part-to-whole relationships (left brain). Multiple correspondence (left brain).
<u>STAGE 2</u>	
Symbol/Sound relationship.	Conservation (right brain).
Learning to decode letter to sounds.	Class inclusion (right brain). Left-right orientation (right brain). Multiple correspondence (left brain). Reversibility (left brain). Blending and segmentation (left brain). Part-to-whole (left brain). Serial relationships (left brain).
<u>STAGE 3</u>	
Using high order units of structure	Class inclusion (right brain) Apprehend meaning (right brain) Symbolic awareness (right brain) Propositional thinking...rules (left brain). Symbolic function (left brain). Seriation and sequence (left brain).

Reading is closely tied to language of the child and words are most easily remembered if they are seen and used in context. This can be met by having children build sentences, then paragraphs, with their own word cards. It is easier to manipulate words and rearrange thoughts using separate cards than to struggle with writing at this stage. This activity can become the initial stage of reading instruction before getting into the abstract books and ditto/workbook syndrome of the basal approach.

THE GESTALT PROCESS APPROACH

Two first grade teachers implemented a totally different approach to teach beginning reading. They daily used word card study for each child, regardless of level. Much of the instruction followed a pattern of presentation which included concrete (naming objects), semi-concrete (matching objects to words), semi-abstract (matching words to pictures) and abstract (word cards held up when called or used to build sentences).

The basic reading skills identified by the basal reading series at readiness and PP levels were presented to the children using the instructional pattern mentioned above. Then, when the students were handed a reader, they could read it, to their astonishment and pleasure. Reading was attainable to all.

After eight weeks, September through October, each student read the words from the readiness and pre-primer lists to the author. This information was collected from the two classes using the Gestalt Process Approach and the two classes who totally followed the basal linear-left-hemispheric curriculum consisting of word study mainly in workbooks and readers. Though this is not a formal research project or design, some interesting observations about sight word acquisition are noted here. Classes A and B used the Gestalt Process Approach. Classes C and D followed the basal linear curriculum. The average number of words recognized instantly by

sight and the range of word acquisition are reported by reader levels, Readiness through PP 3 in Table 6. There were two reading groups in Class A at levels Readiness and PP 1; and, in Class B at level PP 2. Thus, there are two sets of numbers in Table 6 that will differentiate these groups.

TABLE 6
WORD ACQUISITION
FIRST GRADE, 8TH WEEK

	R	PP 1	PP 2	PP 3
<u>CLASS A</u>	32.5 (28-37)	77 (71-83)	87.5 (77-98)	None
	56.0 (55-57)	45.5 (41-50)		
<u>CLASS B</u>	39 (30-48)	56.5 (55-57)	73.5 (72-75)	None
			96 (96)	
<u>CLASS C</u>	7 (1-13)	29 (24-34)	None	65.5 (56-75)
<u>CLASS D</u>	9.5 (8-11)	39.5 (25-54)	54 (41-64)	70.5 (62-79)

The new words presented at each reading level of the basal series are much less than the number presented by Classes A and B. In the basal series 16 words are presented in the Readiness level; 17 words at PP 1 level; 32 words at PP 2 level; and, 41 words at PP 3 level. The total number of words presented to the children when only the basal required list is used is 106 words by the end of the third pre-primer.

Comparing the average number of words learned by each class group at each reading level, an interesting pattern emerges. Groups at the Readiness level in Classes C and D knew an average of 7-9.5 words of the 16 words presented at that level. Classes A and B Readiness groups knew an average

of 32.5-56 words by sight, surpassing the basal presentation by 26-40 words.

By the time the pupils had completed PP 1, only 33 words would have been presented in the basal series. Classes C and D groups in the PP 1 reader had learned an average of 29-39.5 words as compared to those PP 1 groups in Classes A and B at an average of 45.5-77 words learned.

The total words presented through PP 2 were 65 and through PP 3 were 106 words. Classes A and B had groups in PP 2 that had mastered an average of 73.5-96 sight words, surpassing the number presented through that level by 8.5-31 words. These two groups were well into the words presented in the PP 3 reader. Two groups from Classes C and D who had just been placed in PP 3 prior to testing, had mastered an average of 65.5-70.5 words.

For the pupils in Classes A and B, it seems that the high involvement, Gestalt Process approach (right brain) was advantageous. Perhaps a look at the student make-up in each class would add another dimension. One would wonder if Classes A and B consisted of more able students. To the contrary, Classes A and B had a greater percentage of low-average students than Classes C and D. Class A consisted of 41 percent low-average; Class B consisted of 35 percent low-average; Class C had 14 percent low-average; and, Class D had 18 percent low-average. This grouping was strictly accidental as students were assigned randomly to each class. There was no attempt at the beginning of the year to select any particular students for any of the classrooms. The ability of each student was determined by scores on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, Level A which was administered at the end of the Kindergarten year.

CONCLUSION

Young children come to us with a need to be successful in their first academic encounter. It usually is accepted that children like and respond to activities that involve them totally. It seems, then, that every effort to provide active learning in beginning reading instruction would be a benefit to all.

In view of the results found by using the activity oriented Gestalt Process approach, it would be worth investigating further. This would be a viable area for research. Much needs to be learned about the new learning theories which apply brain research to cognitive development. It is hoped that this article will whet the curiosity of some who will delve into this study.

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